

1 March 1968

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Communists' Ability to Recover Their Tet Military Losses

Introduction

1. We have examined and assessed in detail the evidence bearing on the ability of the Communists to replace their military losses sustained in the Tet offensive. We are able to offer only a very tenuous judgment concerning the time frame within which they might accomplish a full recovery in numbers of troops.

2. At a maximum, it appears that this will take them no longer than six months. This assumes that the rate of combat will be sustained at above normal levels, but that no new ground effort on a scale like that at Tet will be mounted. It is entirely possible, however, that they might be able to accomplish full recovery in a much shorter time and that within six months their troop strength would

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be substantially greater than it was prior to '72. Everything hinges on the real extent of their '72 losses and on their ability to recruit and impress personnel in the countryside. On both of these fundamental points evidence is very spotty at present.

The Tet Losses

3. In making our assessment, we included the enemy killed-in-action (KIA) reported by the US military authorities in Vietnam from the period 30 January through 21 February--some 38,600 men. This period covered the mass urban attacks and the "second round" on 18-19 February, as well as its immediate aftermath. We excluded the fighting since 21 February on the grounds that, although enemy losses have continued heavy, they have been overall at a more "normal" level for the war.

4. We have based the assessment on our judgment that roughly 77,000 enemy were involved in the attacks. This included North Vietnamese (NVA) units and main and local forces of about 50,000. (this latter figure was reached independently in a CIA analysis and is also roughly accepted by most US authorities who have studied the offensive, including the US MACV). The additional 26,000 men in our computation of the forces involved in the

offensive were, we believe, members of independent guerrilla units or guerrillas added to local force units for the attacks.

Table I

Strength of Participating Communist Forces
in the Tet Attacks

	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Percent of Total</u>
Total	77,000	100
NVA	21,600	27.8
VC Main Force	16,300	21.6
VC Local Force	19,300	24.9
Guerrillas	20,000	25.7

5. There is good evidence of extensive guerrilla participation in the offensive. Captured documents have now provided us with some detailed planning for the attacks in a few provinces. These suggest that the enemy hoped to use from one half to two thirds of his guerrilla force in an offensive role. It appears that about 20,000 guerrillas actually participated in the urban attacks. The remainder were used in offensive roles against smaller targets such as lines of communication, etc.

6. The dilemma with respect to the casualties arises when the reported enemy KIA (33,600) is considered against the total offensive force estimated

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to have been involved (77,000). Taken at face value, this means that approximately one half of the attacking force was killed in the offensive and its aftermath. This, in itself, is exceedingly difficult to accept--given the postaction reports we already have on the status of some enemy units and the current high level of enemy activity throughout the country. The reports suggest the Communists were badly hurt, but do not indicate that their dead reached 50 percent. A number of the attacking units, moreover, have already reappeared in offensive combat, something they would hardly have been able to do if their losses had been on the order of 50 percent.

7. The reported KIA became even more unacceptable when an attempt was made to account for those who were probably disabled. Even if the standard, conservative factor of .35 died of wounds or were permanently disabled is applied for every KIA, over 13,000 more men are added to the losses. The total casualties computed in this conservative manner, would be nearly two thirds of our strength estimate of those involved in the attacks. The total enemy casualties would be about 90 percent of the assault force, if this force is conceived of only as composed of regular forces (some 50,000).

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Possible Non-Military Casualties

8. Assuming that the KIA figure itself is accurate, it almost certainly must include a substantial proportion of other organizational elements of the enemy apparatus and nonparticipating civilians who happened to be caught in the urban battle areas. US military officials in Vietnam agree that some are probably included. We now know, in addition, that the Communists made a major effort in the few months prior to Tet to fill up their irregular ranks (guerrilla and militia) and to recruit many laborers for logistic support, particularly the so-called "assault youth." Many of the POWs from the offensive were individuals virtually taken from street corners and pressed into the attacks by the enemy. Eyewitnesses, moreover, report that large numbers of civilian-type personnel were used as "shock troops" in many of the urban assaults.

9. Analysis of the available evidence does not provide a good enough base from which to assign even a tenuous percentage to the total number of individuals like those above who might have participated in the attacks and became casualties. Some of

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the evidence, for example, suggests the casualties involving militia-civilians-laborers, etc, may have run about 25 percent of the total; other evidence, however, indicates such casualties may have run as high as 50 percent of the total losses in some areas.

10. Therefore, in adopting a base for judging the Communist recuperative ability, we can only accept the reported KIA figure as it stands--questionable as it is--and view future enemy capabilities against it. In contrast with the point of view of the US military in Vietnam, that the enemy's losses and capability to recoup should be weighed against his offensive military strength, we would be inclined to judge these factors from the standpoint of his total organized manpower base. For this reason, we would include enemy militia and even political infrastructure as sources for troop replacement and as part of the remaining Communist threat.

11. In our view, the organized enemy force structure in South Vietnam prior to Tet and following an extensive recruiting drive sets up approximately as follows:

Table II

Estimated Communist Organized Manpower Base
as of 30 January 1968

VC/NVA Main and Local Forces	160,000
Guerrillas	100,000-120,000
Administrative Services	75,000-100,000
Self-defense Militia	100,000
Political Cadre	80,000-120,000
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	515-600,000

12. The above table of organized strength includes the additional North Vietnamese forces that we know are in country, but which have not yet been added to MACV's OB, as well as a number of specialized units and small elements--city forces in some cases--which have been fairly well identified, but not yet included in the OB. The table also includes a higher strength figure than MACV now carries for the guerrillas, but is reflective, we believe, of the reality of the situation and the pre-Tet recruiting. The self-defense militia is also included in the table since it is an element of enemy defensive strength at least, and one which furnishes some of the manpower for higher level enemy units. The administrative services and political cadre, we believe, also reflect more realistic levels.

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13. Viewed numerically against this base, the enemy's losses, particularly in times of main and local force strength, could be relatively insignificant as a long-term problem. It would seem reasonable that, if the Communists have managed in the past to maintain an organized manpower base of the size postulated in Table II, they could easily recoup their Viet losses in a relatively short period of time, both by recruitment-conscription into the lower level military elements, and by upgrading to the regular forces from the lower level units.

The Replacement Campaign

14. There is abundant evidence that the Communists are now making a strenuous effort to recoup their losses and, in fact, to raise their over-all military force strength above the pre-Viet levels. Selected excerpts from some of the reports on this activity are contained in Annex A. The reports indicate that heavy recruiting is under way in almost all populous areas where the enemy can penetrate, particularly in the Delta, which has long been a prime reservoir for enemy manpower.

15. There is little question that the 1st offensive has opened a new recruitment base to the Viet Cong in the South Vietnamese countryside.

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declining recruitment pool because of refugee movement to NVN-held areas was partially responsible for VC recruitment shortfalls in 1967. The new pool, consisting of the populations of hamlets in the countryside where the VC formerly have had little or no influence, can be expected to boost 1968 recruitment greatly. New-found influence in rural areas--if only in the form of increased popular respect for VC power--will permit VC recruiters easy access to hamlets and a ready audience of youths.

16. Evidence gained from a recent field study indicates that VC recruitment in a specific area is directly related to VC influence in that area. Stated differently, in areas of strong VC influence the Communists are able to mobilize significantly greater shares of the available population. The Tet offensive has enabled the VC/NVA forces to extend their influence and presence into both rural and urban areas which, until recent months, were firmly under RVN control.

17. South Vietnam's countryside offers a substantial recruitment pool for VC cadre. Of South Vietnam's total population of about 17 million, slightly more than 14 million live in rural areas--in hamlets outside of province capitals, district

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capitals, and autonomous cities. Approximately two million of these are males between the ages of 20 and 45, and an additional 680,000 are males from 15 to 19. Although the CVL has already recruited from the 20-45 age group, this recruitment has far from exhausted the available manpower. In addition, the CVN has yet to reach the 15 to 19 age group; these youths are prime targets for VC recruiters.

18. The intensity of the current recruiting drive, the availability of manpower, and the current freedom of the enemy in formerly contested and even some secure areas of the country, all add to the impression that the Communists will be able to replace their losses numerically in a relatively short period of time. Prior to the Tet offensive, enemy recruitment was estimated by US military authorities in Vietnam at between 3-5,000 a month. It is not clear, however, that this rate had shot up in the months immediately preceding Tet. In view of the current enemy recruiting drive and access to the countryside, it does not seem improbable that they can at least double this rate to between 6,000 and 10,000 men a month, at least over the short term. At such a rate, it would take the Communists no more

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than six months, at a maximum, to replace their reported KIA losses during the Tet offensive.

19. This computation, of course, does not take into account the "normal" Communist losses since 21 February, or the future losses during the recuperation period. Over a six-month time frame, such losses could perhaps double the total replacement necessary. During certain periods within the past year, for example, Communist losses have run at a rate of around 4,000 men per month. In the other hand, the replacement rate described above for the Tet losses does not take into account the continuing infiltration of manpower from North Vietnam into the South. This has been running at a rate of about 4,000 to 6,000 men a month on the average during the past year and conceivably could offset the additional combat losses during the Tet recovery period. Infiltration would clearly tend, over a six-month period, at least, to offset NVA unit losses in South Vietnam.

The Qualitative Aspect

20. From the standpoint of troop quality, the Communist losses will be somewhat harder to replace, and a time frame for such recovery cannot be assigned. However, it is probable that the over-all qualitative loss to the enemy during the Tet offensive was not as substantial as the total KIA figures

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would indicate. As noted above, anywhere from 25 to 50 percent of the NVA conceivably were not part of the regular Communist military apparatus. Moreover, there are several other aspects to consider in assessing the qualitative loss. One is the replacement of well-trained cadre in the person of officers, non-coms, and technical specialists. Another aspect is the replacement of trained infantrymen. In the former case, our judgment is that the losses ran around 20 to 30 percent of the net NVA--perhaps 12,000 men. This would include an attrition representing the normal ratio of officers, non-coms, and specialists in Communist units and also some additional allowance for high losses among specially trained units such as sappers who were apparently used extensively in the early stages of the urban offensive.

21. This loss in many ways may be the most serious aspect of the Communist casualties during the offensive, since the training of replacements for these groups will take many months. We know from captured documents, for example, that the Communists have been training large numbers of sappers during the past year in courses ranging up to six months.

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22. The replacement of trained infantry would seem to be a less serious, although still significant, aspect of the loss. Normally, the training cycle for such men in a good southern Communist unit runs about three months. This problem is overcome by the enemy to some extent, however, by his process of upgrading to higher echelons men who have already received partial or rudimentary military training. From the nature of the reporting so far, it would appear that the Communists plan to continue this course in replacing their Tet losses. The regular forces will be filled out by levies from among the irregulars, who will in turn receive the new conscripts and recruits.

23. Perhaps the most important aspect of the qualitative loss among the rank-and-file infantry will be in the youthful age of many of the incoming recruits and conscripts. It is clear that a growing proportion of the Communist forces over the past year have been in the age group from 16 to 18. The exact proportions of the current and prospective age mix of Communist rank-and-file soldiers, however, is far from clear and will probably remain so.

The ARVN's Losses

24. The South Vietnamese Army and paramilitary forces also suffered substantial casualties during

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the recent Tet offensive. From 30 January through 27 February, the army lost over 3,200 killed and 12,000 wounded. This loss rate is approximately three times the normal monthly rate of ARVN casualties during the past year. We have no accounting of troops who might have defected during the recent Tet offensive.

25. Little hard information is available to us on the ability of the ARVN to recoup its manpower losses. We do know that the ARVN had been able, despite its loss rate during 1967, to sustain its over-all combat strength through recruitment and the draft. It had, in fact, increased slightly in strength during the latter half of 1967, after the desertion rate began to drop. It seems likely, however, that, if the ARVN loss rate remains at anything like the level sustained during the past month, the army will be unable to maintain its numerical strength. It is probable that the loss rate will drop substantially from the levels of the past month, although not to the 1967 rate.

26. The current plans of the Saigon government for the augmentation of the ARVN will probably enable the ARVN to maintain its combat strength at roughly the current numerical levels, and perhaps to increase

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it, unless the fighting again flares to major levels. To know little in detail about these plans, although the government has announced that it intends to begin drafting 18- and 19-year-old youths in the first half of 1968. The recall of many ex-service-men and a freeze on discharges of those now in service will also, if fully implemented, help in recouping and adding to the ARVN strength. At this point, it is impossible to predict the time frame in which this will take place.

27. Reporting also is incomplete on the impact of the Tet offensive on the regional and popular forces, the paramilitary arm of the South Vietnamese military establishment. There are indications, however, that these forces, which operate primarily in the countryside, are currently being subjected to a substantial enemy drive aimed at demoralizing them. The effort appears to be achieving some success, especially in the Delta, where regular ARVN troops have pulled in to defend district and provincial towns. There are many reports of outposts formerly held by regional and popular forces that have now been abandoned.

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